

Harpers Ferry / Learning Activities

Introduction

Now it is time to explore reactions to John Brown's raid, decide what this raid means to you, and give voice to your community by writing a letter to a newspaper editor.

First, you will design a character for yourself, a free African American who lived in or near Harpers Ferry in 1859.

Second, you will make choices to define your character and their life.

Third, you will investigate the historic resources using your analytical skills to assess what is being said about the raid and by whom.

Finally, you will write your letter to the editor about the John Brown raid and what impact you think it will have on your freedom. This gives you a voice in the debate!

Creating Your Character

The era of slavery remains a painful and sensitive period in American history. That should not deter us from studying or learning about it, asking questions, and analyzing what happened and why. It is important that we understand the lives of those who came before us, in order to better recognize how we got to where we are today.

The institution of slavery may not have ended were it not for brave African Americans, free and enslaved, and whites who supported their resistance to oppression and devoted their lives to emancipation. Each generation of African Americans maintained the struggle for freedom in different ways. A few chose armed rebellion but most chose more subtle acts of resistance. Through each period it is important we remember the enslaved had lives with needs, emotions, aspirations, hopes and dignity, and they faced difficult choices about how to seek freedom for themselves and their families.

By portraying the role of an African American in 1859, you can bring your own emotions and thoughts to this historical moment in time. This activity will enable you to learn about a particular era in history and honor the memory of people who may have otherwise been forgotten.

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Avoiding Anachronisms

As you create a character you want to be as historically accurate as possible. Thus you have to be careful to avoid ANACHRONISMS (uh-**nak**-ruh-niz-*uhm*).

Anachronisms are representations of someone or something out of its proper historical place. For example, if you lived in the pre-Civil War South, you would not drive a car. Cars were not invented yet. To have your character drive a car would be *anachronistic*.

Language can also be anachronistic. Expressions such as, "Word!" or "Dude!" did not exist; people might have said "Lawd!" or "Glory!" Also, as a slave or a free black you were not called an *African American* or a *person of color*. You were called a *Negro* or *Colored*. This language offends our modern ears, but you will see it repeated throughout the attached resources.

Names can be anachronistic as well. An African American girl in 1859 might have been named Hannah, Sarah, Kate, Nan or Nell, while names that are commonly used today may not have been used. Choosing any of those modern names would be like driving that car; it would not be realistic.

Who Will You Be?

Male or Female?

In your class, you might decide that if you are a girl, your character will be female, and if you are a boy, your character will be a male. If you want to see what the experience of the other gender is, that is fine as well. If you cannot decide, flip a coin.

What Is in a Name?

The names in the charts below were actual names of African Americans during the slavery period.¹ You may notice a few things about them.

- Many of them were Biblical names.
There are many passages in the Bible that refer to slavery and to the proper relationship between slaves and their masters. Accordingly, some slaveholders thought it was appropriate for slaves to have Biblical names. Some of the names were misspellings or uncommon spellings of Biblical names (*Hezkiah* instead of *Hezekiah*, for example).

¹ Names taken from the register called Prince George's County, MD Slave Inventory, at <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.com/~familtinformation/transcripts/pgslvdd1proof.html>
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- Few of the names sound African.
It is commonly believed that slaveholders desired to eliminate connections to their slaves' African culture, beliefs, or traditions. This included customs, language, music (drums could communicate rebellions over long distances), and religion. African names were forbidden in most cases.
- Some of the names are from Greek mythology.
Mythical characters had certain physical qualities. For example, a man named Hercules may have had great strength.
- Some names refer to other physical qualities.
A girl named Coffee may have been named for the hue of her skin.
- The enslaved did not have family names.
If you were enslaved, your owner may not have felt you needed a family name. Having one would make you feel more connected to your parents, your siblings, and your children. Remember that people could be sold, which often divided families. The owner may have wanted you to feel that you had no family other than his. Ironically, if you were free and *had been* enslaved, you might have taken the family name of your former owner. You also might have invented a name you liked, maybe the last name of a person you admired.

Examine the list of names below and choose one for yourself.

Male names

Aaron	Dick	Jeff	Nero	Sande
Adam	Duke	Jerry	Newport	Shallowmar
Baker	Frank	Johnne	Osborn	Sharper
Barkshire	Fuller	Johnny	Patrick	Stephen
Ben	Gabriel	Joshua	Pete	Taylor
Benn	George	Jupiter	Phill	Thomas
Billy	Hammond	Leander	Piper	Tingo
Bob	Harry	Lomax	Plato	Tobey
Booker	Hazard	Mark	Plymouth	Tom
Bristor	Hector	Matthew	Pompey	Tony
Caesar	Hercules	Mingo	Robin	Valentine
Charles	Hezkiah	Moratt	Rochester	Watt
Cos	Hinkley	Nacy	Ross	Wig
Cuffey	Jacob	Nat	Sailsbury	Will
Daniel	Jamie	Ned	Sam	Will
Daniel Lee	Jefery	Neptune	Sampson	William
				Wilson

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Female Names

Allice	Dido	Jenny	Mary	Pegg
Beck	Dinah	Joice	Masy	Phillis
Bess	Doll	Judith	Mille	Polly
Betty	Ester, Esther	Judy	Moll	Rachel
Bridgitt	Fiana	Kate	Nan	Rose
Casky	Flora	Kate	Nancy	Sall
Cate	Flowrow	Kathy	Nann	Sarah
Charity	Ginne	Leah	Nanny	Sarai
Ciss	Grace	Liddia	Nimbe	Sedde
Clara	Hagear	Lucey	Page	Sib
Clare	Hannah	Lucy	Pagg	Sue
Coffee	Jane	Margery	Patience	Suke
Daffany	Jeaney	Marreah	Patte	Susannah
				Venus

What Does It Mean to Be A Free Black?

The chart below provides statistical information on the population of free and enslaved inhabitants of Harpers Ferry (and two communities connected to it), Jefferson County, the entire state of Virginia, and in all the states in which slavery was legal in 1860. The African American community in Harpers Ferry is quite small, only 217 people, and the free population even smaller.

Ask yourself what significance a small community has:

- Does everyone know each other?
- Is there a unified opinion among everyone?
- How does being such a small part of the town's general population affect your ability to speak on behalf of abolition?

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Population by Color and Status, Harpers Ferry, Bolivar, Virginius Island, and Related Jurisdictions, 1860						
	White		Slave		Free Black	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Harpers Ferry, Bolivar, Virginius Island	1,522	88	104	6	113	6
Jefferson Co.	10,064	69	3,960	27	514	4
Virginia	1,047,299	66	490,865	31	58,042	4
All Slave States	9,144,762	68	3,953,696	29	319,960	2

Source: Figures from U.S. Census Office, 8th Census, *Population of the United States in 1860* (Washington, 1864). Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.

Slaveholders and Slaveholding, Harpers Ferry and Related Jurisdictions, 1860						
	Free Households	Slaveholders		Average # of slaves in household	Owners of 20 or More Slaves	
		Number	% of Free H'sehlds Owning Slaves		Number	% of Slaveholding Households Owning 20+ Slaves
Harpers Ferry	218	37	17	2	0	0
Jefferson Co.	1,943	634	33	6	17	3
Virginia	201,523	52128	26	9	5,777	11
All Slave States	1,529,605	395,196	26	10	47,559	12

Source: Calculated from figures from U.S. Census Office, 8th Census, *Population of the United States in 1860* (Washington, 1864).

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How Did You Live?

You have decided whether you are male or female and you have chosen a name. You now have an identity as one of the 113 free black persons in Harpers Ferry and its adjoining communities around 1859. Remember, you are free. A slave would probably be unable to write a letter to an editor, due to poor education or a lack of freedom (again, we are avoiding anachronisms).

Now you will develop your character.

- Are you in your 20s? 40s? 70s?
- How much education do you have?
- Were you a slave at one point; if so how did you become free?
- If not, how did your parents or grandparents become free?

If you are free and female, you could earn your living as a domestic servant: a cook, cleaner, nursemaid, or midwife. If you are free and male you may work in a mill or factory, be a baker, tinsmith, coppersmith, blacksmith, carpenter, canal worker, porter, or servant.

Other questions to consider:

- Do you attend church every Sunday? (Chances are you do).
- Do you have a spouse? Children? Grandchildren?
- How well do you keep up with abolition news in the north?
- Do you have white acquaintances? If so, what is your relation with them? How do they treat you?

Take a few moments to answer these questions and create a believable character. A few biographies of free blacks from this time period are included below to help you. Use your imagination to enhance what you know about the time period and ask your teacher for help. Write a diary entry, a poem, or draw a picture that somehow represents your work, community, quality of life, or restrictions. This is all to ensure you have developed your historical character well, because he/she will become an important voice in a nationwide debate.

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Dangerfield Newby

In 1859, Dangerfield Newby was a member of John Brown's army of 21 men. Born in Fauquier County, Virginia, of mixed Scottish-African descent, Newby had been freed by his white father. During his lifetime, Dangerfield Newby worked as a blacksmith and a canal worker. At six feet two inches and with intense and penetrating eyes, Newby cut an impressive figure.

At some point in his life, Newby married and had a family with Harriet Newby. Harriet and Dangerfield had six children together. Unfortunately, the Newby family remained separated, for while Dangerfield had been freed, his wife and children remained enslaved in Warrington, Virginia. Harriet's letters to Dangerfield speak to the desperation and sadness of a family divided by slavery — the fear that at any moment, the family could be sold and split apart.

Newby devoted his life to raising enough money to buy his family's freedom. He reached a deal with Harriet's owner, Jesse Jennings and worked for years to raise the agreed upon \$1,000. When the day came to finally buy his family's liberty, Jesse Jennings informed Newby that the price had increased. \$1,000 was no longer enough. Shortly thereafter, a dejected and desperate Newby joined John Brown and his army.

A free black born to a white father and with relatively high earning power as a laborer, it is possible Newby had contacts with white residents around Harpers Ferry. He was also able to read and write, and probably had a decent education. He almost surely read reports in the local newspapers on the slavery question and abolitionist activities in the North and South. His decision to risk his stable job, income, and status to join Brown's raid indicates how slavery influenced not only the lives of the enslaved but the lives of free blacks as well.

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Isaac Gilbert

Isaac Gilbert was the sole slave of an elderly Harpers Ferry widow, Susan Harding. Although Susan Harding owned Gilbert, she held him in great affection, ultimately leaving him a decent amount of money and referring to him as her "faithful servant" in her will. Gilbert's wife, Sarah, and three children, John, Helen, and Isaac, also lived enslaved but were owned by the family of Dr. James Logie outside of Harpers Ferry.

To keep his family together, Isaac Gilbert wished to buy their freedom. To accomplish this, Gilbert needed to overcome two huge obstacles. As a slave, how was he to earn the money to buy his family's freedom? Even more problematic was that, as a slave, Gilbert himself was someone's property. According to law, a slave was property and therefore could not own other property.

Gilbert was able to work within the white community to overcome these two obstacles. First, he made an arrangement with Susan Harding to keep the bulk of the money that he earned as a laborer in the Harpers Ferry community, which was not an uncommon arrangement. Additionally, Isaac Gilbert sought help from Fontaine Beckham, the mayor of Harpers Ferry. Beckham, who was known as a friend to the black community of Harpers Ferry, agreed to buy the Gilbert family from Dr. Logie using the money that Isaac Gilbert earned. Beckham further agreed to free the Gilbert family at the request of Gilbert, and recorded a will in the county courthouse that stated that upon his death, the family of Isaac Gilbert would be freed.

Over a number of years, Gilbert was able to earn \$1,400 for his family's freedom, which was a large sum in 1859, and Fontaine Beckham kept his part of the deal by purchasing the Gilbert family.

Gilbert must have been a kind and attentive companion to an old and presumably lonely widow such as Ms. Harding, and as a result the two developed a close bond that nearly transcended race and social status. His story also indicates the very different attitude towards the enslaved by politicians in this part of Virginia, compared to the rest of the state.

Most likely, Isaac Gilbert was unaware of John Brown's plan to attack Harpers Ferry.

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Heyward Shepherd

Heyward Shepherd was a free black man who in 1859 had worked for twelve years as a porter and baggage master aboard the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in Harpers Ferry. Shepherd owned property and was considered to be well to do among free black men in Virginia. A physically prominent man (he stood over six feet tall), Shepherd was respected and well liked in his community. He was married and had five children.

Although free, Shepherd encountered many restrictions to his freedom, as did all free black men living in Virginia in the 1850s. One of the major restrictions was a Virginia law that required any free black person remaining in Virginia for a year and a day to have a white sponsor—someone who would accept or share responsibility for him. Shepherd found that sponsor in Fontaine Beckham, the mayor of Harpers Ferry. From all accounts the two men shared a mutual respect and friendship.

Heyward Shepherd was working for the railroad on the night of the attack of John Brown's army. Early in the morning of October 17, 1859, Heyward Shepherd went to investigate a commotion he heard on the railroad bridge leading into Harpers Ferry. He was then fired upon by of Brown's men, resulting in the first fatality of the raid.

Shepherd's biography illustrates a relatively stable and comfortable life for a free black man in Harpers Ferry.

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Make Your Voice Heard!

You now have a well-defined character and knowledge of Harpers Ferry, the life of free blacks of this time period, and John Brown's raid and the historical context surrounding it.

Now it is late 1859. You and your community lived through the chaos and excitement of the raid, but the enslaved are still enslaved. Brown sits in jail and locals are outraged and nervous. For weeks you have read articles, letters, and speeches on the Brown raid in the local newspapers and you have seen reports from around the country published in area papers as well. Some northerners and abolitionists have called the raid heroic, others have called it treasonous. Some writers say it will lead to emancipation, other writers claim it glorifies the South.

Lost in this debate is the voice of African Americans. Your community needs to voice its opinion on the raid, for the sake of your own welfare, for the sake of the enslaved, and for the sake of the Northerner abolitionists fighting for your greater cause. After speaking with all the African Americans, both free and enslaved, you decide to form your response in a letter to the editors of the northern newspapers. What is your opinion of John Brown? Do such acts of rebellion help or hurt the cause for freedom?

First, you will carefully review the resources below to learn what the arguments and counter-arguments of the moment are. Pay close attention to the source of the argument and what the stance on John Brown is. After reviewing the sources and taking into account all the information you have learned about slavery, John Brown, and life in Harpers Ferry, compose a one-page letter to the North explaining your community's viewpoint on the raid and what should be done next to further the anti-slavery cause.